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COAL-TO-LIQUID FUEL PLANT EYED AT MALMSTROM

By The Great Falls Tribune

The Air Force is seriously considering a partnership in which a potential commercial interest could build a 20,000- to 30,000-gallon-a-day coal-to-liquid-fuel plant at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont., by as early as 2011.

That was the briefing that Assistant Air Force Secretary William Anderson gave to reporters at the Great Falls base last week following a closed two-hour meeting with local elected officials and business leaders.

Anderson said the Air Force, the government's biggest user of fuel, is committed to finding alternative fuel sources that will reduce the nation's dependence on overseas oil.

He said the Air Force agrees with Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer that the current price of oil and advances improving aspects of synthetic fuels make it an attractive alternative.

The Air Force plans to schedule an industry day early next year in which bankers, builders and operators of synthetic fuel plants can look at Malmstrom facilities and speak to the public. Soon after, the Air Force would put out a request for specific proposals and evaluate where to go next, he said.

The Air Force could lease 700 "under-utilized acres" at Malmstrom to a private company to build and operate the plant, with the fuel being sold to the Air Force and commercial interests, Anderson said. The plant would sit on about 400 acres, with the other 300 acres serving as a buffer between the plant and base housing and missile operations buildings.

Those 700 acres would include land upon which Malmstrom's runway and flight operations buildings sit, but Anderson said the Air Force has no plans to reopen the runway for a flying mission. It would cost "many million dollars to do so," he added.